

Go Ahead, Balance The Budget

Believe it or not, you can actually do this on an interactive web site created by the New York Times. (You can find it here: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/11/13/weekinreview/deficits-graphic.html>) There are two graphics at the top of the page: one is the projected shortfall in 2015 (a scary \$418 billion), and the other is a more long-term (and scarier) deficit in 2030 (\$1.345 trillion).

To reduce those numbers, you make hard choices. You can cut foreign aid in half, eliminate all farm subsidies, cut the pay of civilian federal workers by 5 percent, reduce the federal workforce by 10 percent, reduce the military to pre-Iraq War size and reduce troops in Asia and Europe, reduce the number of troops in Iran and Afghanistan to 30,000 by 2013 (or make more modest cuts), raise the Social Security retirement age (there are two options), modify estate taxes, reduce or eliminate the Bush tax cuts, or impose a national sales tax and/or carbon tax.

And more. With each box you check (each cut you make or tax you raise), you see how much progress you're making on the overall budget deficit in 2015 and 2030. The choices are not easy ones, and you quickly discover that the "fixes" most often debated on both sides of the aisle in Congress won't make much of a dent.

Unfortunately, there isn't a button on the web site that you can push to make these deficit reduction provisions actually happen in the real world. But having an easy, interactive tool like this will undoubtedly help raise awareness, for us citizens who don't deal with these budget numbers on a daily basis, about the kind of measures that will have to be taken if we don't want to leave our children and grandchildren with a ton of federal debt to pay off.

I hope you will remember this little game next time you hear a politician talking tough about eliminating debt in Washington. And politicians of all stripes tend to make believe (and want us to believe) they can give us everything we want at little cost or pain. Don't believe them. Hard choices are indeed hard choices. I also hope it may also help to temper our interpersonal discussions about what is and is not possible in the heated debate over what to cut and whether taxes should be raised.

(Oh, and I would be happy to share my hard choices with you. Took me 10 minutes to make the decisions necessary to balance the budget. Mine broke 60% tax increases and 40% spending cuts.)